

Aurora's historical storytellers return to Town Square for Family Day

Examples of our heritage are all around us, but it takes a person with passion for history and the people who made it to really tease out their stories.

Jacqueline Stewart, John McIntyre, and Bob McRoberts are just three of those special people ? and they have published works on Aurora to prove it. Now, they're returning to their historical storytelling roots on Monday when they kick off Heritage Week with quizzes, snapshots, and a peek behind the curtain of one of Yonge Street's most prominent residential landmarks.

The Aurora Town Square Performance Hall will provide the backdrop to Heritage Week's opening ceremonies on Monday, February 16, before being turned over to the trio who will each be leading three unique events.

The program begins at 10:30 a.m. with One Upon a Time: The Postcards of Olde Aurora, led by long-time educator, former Deputy Mayor of Aurora and School Trustee, and current member of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee Bob McRoberts.

McRoberts has long had a passion for collecting these ephemeral pieces of communication and, with his collection's extensive archive of Aurora-related missives, has used his collection to tell an evocative community story.

?I think it's a special opportunity for new and old residents in Town to come and enjoy and appreciate the Town that they live in, get different perspectives, whether it's a new resident looking to just get to know their community better or someone who has been here a long time,? says McRoberts of Heritage Week.

While he has been a long-time collector, he made his first presentation on postcards back in 2011. This presentation eventually led to a book encapsulating Aurora's history through the medium, published in commemoration of Aurora's Sesquicentennial in 2013.

?Most of the cards I have ? and I've now got over 300 for Once Upon a Time, are from the turn-of-the-century, early 1900s, and I think pictures can say a lot without necessarily a lot of words going with them,? he says, before teasing. ?I have a card from about 1906 where people are sliding down a hill at the back of some houses on a toboggan and I have no idea where that is located, where the houses are, so I would be very interested in someone helping me to identify where that mystery postcard was taken!?

If you're particularly good with photo IDs, you're a shoe-in for the next activity: The Great Aurora Built Heritage Quiz at 1 p.m., led by former Aurora Museum curator, author, and regular Time Traveller's Diary columnist Jacqueline Stewart.

?I thought this would be mildly entertaining for people,? says Stewart with trademark self-deprecation. ?The slides are odds and ends that people might not have noticed; in some cases, the smallest things that people might not have noticed before and might like to hear more about. After I show or explain the location, I will give a little bit of information to draw people's attention and give them a little, fun challenge to identify what they are seeing.?

?There's always so much to learn,? she adds when asked what keeps her continually engaged in Aurora's heritage. ?There's always the little details, and I think the most difficult things to find out are about people's personal lives.?

That hasn't necessarily been a challenge for McIntyre, a life-long Aurora resident until his recent move to Nova Scotia. Before the move, he called Horton Place, the sandy-coloured brick house on the northwest corner of Yonge Street and Irwin Avenue, home ? and that is the basis of his virtual talk: Discovering the Stories of Horton Place at 2 p.m.

?It's certainly exciting and just knowing I can still be a part of this at a long distance is certainly very gratifying,? says McIntyre of Heritage Week. ?I've always been very concerned about the importance of heritage and the belief in the way that if we have an appreciation of our heritage, it makes our present much more rich and fulfilling. It just means that we have a better community all-around.?

McIntyre has been immersed in an ongoing project charting the histories of two particular branches of his family tree, and, in the process, was particularly struck by the stories his grandparents left behind of their time at the landmark house, which is now home to the offices of Desjardins agent Richard Gong.

The house, says McIntyre, was built by dentist Dr. Alfred Robinson, part of the first graduating class from the University of Toronto's School of Dentistry.

?Previously, dentistry had been something that was practiced by your local physician, not by specialists, but he had received specific training in dentistry and dental surgery and the use of what we would call today as laughing gas, which meant that he could advertise painless dentistry, even though I don't know that that was actually painless,? says McIntyre.

?In 1901, after Dr. Robinson's death, the Robinson family sold the house to my grandparents, Della Petch Webster and Charles Webster. I have been very fortunate in that they left behind a wonderful archive of diaries and letters, very meticulously described originally their courtship in the late 1890s and their marriage in their early years at Horton Place.?

His grandmother, who was born in 1875, always dreamed of living at Horton Place, having often visited the house for dance lessons and other activities organized by the dentist's daughters.

As newlyweds, his grandparents rented a small house a block away from Horton Place, but when the house was put up for sale in 1901, they jumped at the chance to buy it and make her dream a reality.

To hear the full story, turn out for the start of Heritage Week at Aurora Town Square this Monday, February 16.

For a full roster of events not just on Family Day but throughout the week, visit aurora.ca/heritageweek.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter